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Top CIA Official Admits Arms Drops

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Washington — A top CIA official has conceded that he assisted U.S.-backed efforts to ship weapons to the Nicaraguan contras during a period in which Congress had banned military aid to the rebels, according to declassified testimony released yesterday.

Testimony by Alan Fiers, chief of the CIA Central American Task Force, also revealed that CIA-owned helicopters were used to carry arms to the contras, possibly with members of the private supply network aboard, in early 1986. It was unclear how extensively the helicopters may have been used. Fiers said he objected to the use, which was investigated by the agency's inspector general and is being reviewed by special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh.

While Fiers and other officials have maintained that most of their Central American activities were permissible under the law or at least sanctioned by top administration officials, use of the government-owned CIA aircraft in 1986 would be a direct violation of the military ban and other congressional restrictions on CIA activities.

Fiers said that when he first heard reports that a CIA craft had been used, he ordered those involved to stop the activity and reveal the incident in full to the inspector general. But even so, he later got indications that the subordi-

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CIA Central American Task Force Chief Alan Fiers' testimony revealed that CIA-owned helicopters were used to carry arms to the contras, possibly with members of the private supply network aboard.

nates involved, who were not identified in the testimony, did not fully describe the incident to the internal investigator, Fiers said. The committee investigating the Iran-contra affair also released documents indicating it developed no "concrete evidence" that contra leaders or contra organizations are involved in U.S.-sanctioned drug smuggling, despite persistent news reports of such activity.

The committee staff memorandum said that in hundreds of interviews with U.S. and foreign law-enforcement officials, pilots, crews, contra leaders and others — as well as an examination of contra financial records — investigators turned up no evidence to corroborate the drug-smuggling allegations. The staff memo noted that prosecutor Walsh as well as the FBI still are investigating possibly linked drug activity, and recommended that the Iran-contra panel end its probe of any drug connections and instead cooperate with other congressional panels still looking into the matter.

Fiers, whose name was blacked out in the documents but who has been identified previously, also admitted to the committee that he had deliberately misled the House Intelligence Committee last fall when he and another CIA official, Claire George, along with Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, were grilled about possible U.S. government involvement with the secret contra-supply network.

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Fiers' testimony, taken by the Iran-contra committee early this month and released after declassification, generally confirmed accounts by other witnesses that the CIA aided the supply network that was operated by private individuals under the direction of fired National Security Council aide Oliver North. But Fiers repeatedly insisted that he tried to stay within the strict limitations imposed on the CIA by the so-called Boland amendment, which prohibited the intelligence agency from becoming directly involved in the rebel military effort.

The exception to his staying within the limits, Fiers said, was in early 1986 when, he admitted, the CIA provided intelligence and directions for air drops of lethal supplies to the contras fighting on Nicaragua's southern front.

"I got a little too rambunctious, like a colt that got out of the barn to play, and I pulled myself back in," Fiers told the panel. "I didn't do it all myself. My task force lawyer was whispering like Jimmy Cricket in my ear."

Documents released by the committee along with Fiers' testimony show that in March, 1986 — during the period Fiers described as that in which he was too free-wheeling — Fiers explicitly directed his subordinates to aid in a supply drop to the rebels.

At another point, Fiers indicated that he was concerned that former CIA Costa Rican station chief Joe Fernandez, who operated under the code name Tomas Castillo, was becoming too directly involved in the private network with his coordination of the supply drops through an air strip in Costa Rica. Fiers suggested that Fernandez, who was not identified in the transcript but whose identity was confirmed by a congressional source, enlist a contra member to act as a communications link between the private U.S. suppliers working with retired Air Force major general Richard Secord and the rebels. That would insulate the CIA from a direct link with the private network, and, Fiers insisted, would have been within the bounds of the law.

Fiers, who has been described by other witnesses as a member of a trio — along with North and Abrams — directing the Central American operation, repeatedly said he could not re-

call specifics of intelligence data and other information he provided to North. However, he conceded he had supplied intelligence to North because North was the key administration official directing the Nicaraguan effort.

"There is very little . . . that happened in Central America that I didn't talk to Ollie about," he said. He insisted, however, he did not know North was giving the intelligence to the rebels.

Under harsh questioning from several panel members, Fiers defended his testimony before the House Intelligence Committee in October, after a cargo plane for the private network was shot down in Nicaragua. He did not then correct testimony by Abrams and George, who were telling the panel that Americans were not involved in the contra supply network.

Fiers said he kept his silence, even

though he knew many details of the private network, because he was part of a "team" that obviously was not prepared to reveal the activities to Congress. "I was a member of the administration team. I wasn't going to break ranks with the team," he said.

Under questioning by Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), Fiers claimed he was unaware that the CIA had deliberately kept from the House intelligence panel reports showing the agency knew as early as March, 1986, that Secord was purchasing arms abroad and ferrying them to the contras in cargo planes.

Fiers also:

• Said he did not instruct Lewis Tambo, former U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica, to open up a "southern front" in the war from his embassy post. Tambo has testified that North

asked him to do so and that it was his understanding that North was making the request on behalf of the restricted agency group of which Fiers was a member.

• Acknowledged that he previously told the Tower commission that an unidentified "courier" coming to bring former CIA Director William Casey paperwork during a trip to Central America in November told the director that there "may be a problem." This was eight to 10 days before Attorney General Edwin Meese held his explosive news conference in which the diversion of profits to the contras from the Iran arms sales was revealed. That would mean that Casey, when he went before the Senate Intelligence Committee before Meese's news conference and after the courier talked to him, knew of the diversion but didn't mention it.